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AUTHOR	Ballard, Katherine D.
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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study examined children's self reports of media habits and academic performance. Chosen by a sample of convenience, 20 children between the ages of 8 and 14 years old (all residents of Indiana or Ohio) expressed that increased time with media takes away time spent studying. Many view media as a distraction to completing homework, even though their total media exposure time exceeds time spent studying. A majority of students reported attaining grades of B or higher in school. Students may be limiting their time with media while studying in order to complete their homework. Total time spent with media may not be a predictor of academic success. Interview protocol is appended. (Author/NKA)

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ED 479 205

Media Habits and Academic Performance:

Elementary and Middle School Students' Perceptions

Katherine D. Ballard

Ball State University

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines children's self reports of media habits and academic performance. Chosen by a sample of convenience, twenty children between the ages of 8 and 14 years old express that increased time with media takes away time spent studying. Many view media as a distraction to completing homework, even though their total media exposure time exceeds time spent studying. A majority of students report attaining grades of B or higher in school. Students may be limiting their time with media while studying in order to complete their homework. Total time spent with media may not be a predictor of academic success.

Media Habits and Academic Performance:

Elementary and Middle School Students' Perceptions

This exploratory study gathered information about the way children perceive the relationship between media habits and an ability to perform in school. On average, the American child spends more time interacting with media (e.g., television, radio, etc.) than with any other activity, excluding sleep (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). Most children have access to one or multiple televisions, radios, print materials, CD players, computers, and video games within in the home. Many have these media in their bedrooms, allowing them to consume media privately and without adult supervision. Past survey data suggests that parents tend to underestimate their child's media usage (Roberts, et al., 1999). Consequently, survey data for this study was gathered through children's self-reports.

Previous research studies (Dorr & Rabin, 1995; Huston, et al., 1992) have correlated children's academic performance with their total media usage, suggesting that students who spend more time with media perform less well in school. Roberts, et al. found that children between the ages of 8 and 13 reported the highest media exposure of any age group. Media exposure qualified as the total time a child is exposed to any form of media. For example, a child playing on the computer for one hour while having the radio on simultaneously would have two hours of media exposure.

The following study provided an approach to understanding the ways in which students perceive the relationship between media habits and an ability to perform academic tasks. It is important to assess the ways in which children use media. Often, children will report having some form of media on as background while they perform other tasks.

Method

Participants

Twenty children between the ages of 8-14 were interviewed, half of the participants were girls and half were boys. Among girls, school grades 2nd through 8th were represented, with the median being 7th grade. The girls had an age range of 8-13 with a median age of 13, whereas the boys had an age range of 8-14, with a median age of 11. School grades represented by the boys were 2nd through 8th as well, with the median being 5th grade. The children were chosen from a sample of convenience recruited through friends, acquaintances, and family over a period of two months. All children interviewed resided in Indiana or Ohio. Students were from a mid to high socioeconomic background and primarily of Caucasian descent.

Materials

A 32 question interview guide gathered information regarding media available in the home, plus the students' media habits and study skills (see Appendix). The interview guide was created by examining two previous questionnaires, one from the *Kids & Media at the New Millennium* produced by the Kaiser Family Foundation Report (Roberts, et al., 1999) and the other entitled *A Normative Study of Family Media Habits* (Gentile & Walsh, 2002).

Procedure

Parents of potential participants were contacted by phone or e-mail and asked if they would give permission for their child to participate in the study. After verbally agreeing to participate, both the parent and the child signed a permission form before the interview. A 15-20 minute semi-structured interview was conducted with each child. The session took place in a quiet area in the family's home or in some cases, another quiet setting designated by the

parent. The selected area insured the child's privacy to answer questions without having a family member in the same room.

Results

This research focused on students' perceptions of media usage and its relationship to academic performance. Two questions address this issue directly. Question 25 asked, "If your classmates spent a lot to time watching TV or listening to CDs, do you think they would do well in school? Why or why not?" Overall 80% of the students (n = 16) perceived a negative relationship between media usage and academic performance. Only one student provided a qualified "yes", stating, "wouldn't help them, but doesn't hurt them". Table 1 lists some of the responses to this question.

TABLE 1

Students' Comments about Media Habits Affecting Academic Performance Negatively

- Some classmates know everything on TV and don't know anything about schoolwork
- Can't concentrate on what you're doing
- Would watch TV and do homework. Would mess up work
- Probably not because then they would listen all the time and wouldn't get work done
- They would do too much of that and they would do that and not pay attention to homework and they would get bad grades
- TV makes you want to watch it and makes school work boring
- Not if they spend all of time doing it (watching media). You can tell who is not paying attention and watches too much TV
- Wouldn't be able to concentrate on school work, would spend all your time on game cube
- Takes mind off of studying and wouldn't study if distracted. They would watch TV and not do their homework. Can tell which students study and which don't
- Might not get homework done-get yellow slips (when homework not done)
- Sometimes it prevents them from getting work done and studying
- They don't get schoolwork done and wouldn't know all the things for class
- They would do better (if) they wouldn't have the distraction or playing video games

Cross tabulations by sex, age, and self-report of academic performance found no meaningful differences on this question. Of the boys, 90% saw a negative relationship; of the girls, 70% did.

Question 26 followed the previous question, by asking, "What about if they spent less time?" In other words, if students spent less time with media, would they do better in school? The results were in agreement with results for Question 25. Most students (70%, n = 14) felt their classmates would do better. The single "no" response (who also provided the only "yes" reply to Question 25) stated, "Wouldn't do better, be boring without it." The 25% (n = 5) of the students who replied differently gave variations of "it depends". Cross tabulations were likewise without important findings.

To assess how students perceived media impacting their ability to study, Question 19 asked about media usage while completing homework; "Do you turn any of them (media items) on while you study?" Of those who had media present in the room where they studied, 59% (n = 10) stated that they did not turn any media on. The remaining children (n = 7) stated either "yes" or "sometimes" to turning media on. In Questions 20 and 21, students were asked to describe their study skills, in particular, what helps them to concentrate and what distracts them. Question 20 asked, "When you're trying to get your homework done, what helps you to concentrate?" Half (50%, n = 10) of the students stated "quiet" helped them to concentrate. Three students who had previously answered "no" to "studying with media on" stated other concentration devices besides "quiet." Five students felt music enabled their ability to concentrate on homework. The other students' responses (25%, n = 5) fell in the "other" category.

What would students consider to be distracting when studying? To answer this, question 21 asked, "What distracts you from doing your homework?" Of those interviewed, 30% (n = 6) stated "noise" distracted them, 20% (n = 4) stated "other people around," and 5% (n = 1)

remained in the "other" category. The most common distraction (45%, n = 9) was "television". Five of the students who responded music helped them to concentrate, stated noise or the TV distracted their studying. Cross tabulations for questions 19, 20, and 21 not did reveal any important findings. Both students who reported having grades of B's & C's reported turning on media while studying, whereas 25% (n = 2) of the students who reported "Mostly A's" responded "yes" to turning on media while studying.

If some media is a distraction to a student's ability to study, then what types of media do students see as being the most interfering? The next series of questions addressed whether students felt certain media distracted them more than others. Question 24a stated, "Do you think watching television ever keeps you from getting your homework done?" Questions 24b-d were asked in a similar format but replaced "watching television," with "listening to music", "playing video games", "being on the computer", or "reading a book or magazine". Students either responded "no" or "yes". When they responded "yes", students were asked to specify whether that media item was "sometimes", "often", or "a lot" distracting. Table 2 displays the responses students gave to whether they were distracted from studying by a certain media:

TABLE 2

Media as a Distraction to Homework*

	TV	Music	Games*	Computer	Reading*
No	25% (5)	60% (12)	50% (7)	45% (9)	47% (9)
Sometimes	65% (13)	40% (8)	36% (5)	45% (9)	32% (6)
Often	10% (2)	--- ---	14% (2)	10% (2)	16% (3)
A lot	--- ---	--- ---	--- ---	--- ---	5% (1)
N/A	--- ---	--- ---	6	--- ---	1

* The percentages are valid percentages. For example, 6 children did not have game players so they were not used in the computation of percentages for games.

Of the students interviewed, 75% (n = 15) reported that watching television sometimes or often kept them from getting their homework done. Music was sometimes seen as a distraction

by less than half of the students (40%, n = 8). Of those students who played video games, 50% (n = 7) said they sometimes or often were kept from homework by playing games. Being on the computer was viewed as being distracting by 55% of the students (n = 11), and so was leisure reading by over half of those interviewed (53%, n = 10). Similarly, cross tabulations did not show any meaningful findings.

Since certain media could possibly interfere with students' ability to study, it was important to assess how much time they spent exposed to media each day during the school week. Questions 11a through 11g asked students to report their average time spent in the presence of media each day during the school week. Students were asked to report their total media exposure. In answering, they included time when they were actively engaged with a media and when it was simply background noise. Questions asked them when they: had the radio on, television on, CD player on, taped program or movie on, or played a video or computer game, read a book for fun, or read a magazine. The total media exposure time was summed for each individual student and then averaged. The mean for media exposure each day during the school week was 5.3 hours (standard deviation = 3.67) with a range of 1.5 to 16.5 hours. Question 7 asked students the following: "During the school week, about how many hours do you spend each day doing your homework for school?" The mean for spending time on homework per day during the school week was 1.55 hours (standard deviation of 1.67) with a range of 0 to 6 hours.

Discussion

The main question of whether students perceived media as affecting academic performance was primarily addressed in questions 25 and 26. The majority of students interviewed perceived a negative relationship between increased time with media and an ability to perform well in school. Time management was the main rationale students used to explain the

negative relationship. Many students stated time with media takes away time from completing homework. This issue can be viewed as a form of displacement. Students saw media as being a hindrance to academic performance when media displaced the quantity of time spent studying. When commenting on their classmates' media habits, some stated there were students who knew a lot about TV, but knew little about schoolwork. Such statements demonstrate that students were aware that spending time with media could negatively affect school performance if it affected an ability to study.

The other issue raised did not involve time but rather how media distracts the student's ability to concentrate on homework. When asked about their study skills, students identified a difficulty to focus on their studies while media was present. Many reported they did not turn on media while studying and worked best when their environment was quiet. When asked what distracted them most from studying, almost half of them named television directly. One student in response to Question 25 explained TV's distraction by saying, "TV makes you want to watch it and makes school work boring." Of the distractions, students perceived television as being the most common distraction when compared to radio, computer, video game usage, and leisure reading. Past studies have correlated a student's increased time watching television with lowered school performance (Huston et al., 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). The students involved in this study seemed to be aware that watching television would interfere with their ability to complete their homework.

Other activities involving media such as playing games, being on the computer, and listening to music were all considered distractions to doing homework. Even though these items were considered distractions, students spent more time exposed to media during the school week than they did in completing their homework, which is consistent with the overall findings of

Roberts, et al. (1999). On average, a student was exposed to 5.3 hours of leisure media per day during the school week and spent 1.55 hours each day during the school week completing homework. Most of those interviewed reported grades of "Mostly A's" and "A & B's." How is it that these students performed well in school given they spent more time with media in their free time than working on their studies? They themselves stated increased time with media affects school performance. One possibility is some students are aware of how media distracts them and proactively limit their exposure.

Another factor could be parental involvement and their monitoring of their child's media usage. A parent could be reinforcing a belief that spending time with media affects the student's ability to complete schoolwork. Current research regarding child media habits focused on the family structure and family dynamics (Gentile & Walsh, 2002). For example, parents could reinforce the belief that spending time with media affects the student's ability to complete schoolwork. Parents could also be establishing rules on how much time a student is allowed with certain media. According to the *Kids & the New Millennium* report, the average American child has the following available in the home: 3 televisions, 2 VCRs, 3 radios, 3 tape players, 2 CD players, and a video game player. It may beneficial to examine ho and when students use media. How parents and their children perceive media habits affecting school performance may shape how media exposure is limited, either by the child or the parent.

This exploratory study was limited by its size and sample of convenience. Most of the children were from a similar socio-economic background and were similar in their activities and education, consequently generalizability is limited. Future research needs a more representative sample across ethnicity, age, sex, and educational level to better explain the relationship between media habits and academic performance. Other considerations need to include parental

involvement and how certain media are used within the home. Despite its limitations, this study raises questions regarding how students perceive media habits influencing an ability to complete schoolwork. A student's academic achievement may not be predicted from total media usage alone. More important might be how students manage media exposure in relation to their ability to complete their studies effectively.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Location:_____

Date:_____

Male Female

Background

1. How old are you?

8 9 10 11 12 13 14

2. What grade are you in?

2 3 4 5 6 7 8

3. What do you like to do in your free time?

4. What activities are you involved in, such as sports, clubs, things like that?

5. During the school week, about how many hours a day do you spend with these activities (referring to Q.4)?

6. On weekends, about how many hours a day do you spend with these activities?

7. During the school week, about how many hours do you spend each day doing your homework for school?

8. On weekends, about how many hours do you spend each day doing your homework for school?

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Media Inventory

9a. How many televisions are in your home?

1 2 3 4 5 6

9b. How about radios (include clock radio)?

1 2 3 4 5 6

9c. VCRs?

1 2 3 4 5 6

9d. CD players?

1 2 3 4 5 6

9e. Computers? With or without internet access?

1 2 3 4 5 6

9f. DVD players?

1 2 3 4 5 6

9g. Game players, for example, Game Cube?

1 2 3 4 5 6

9.h How many books are in your home?

A lot Some Few None

9.i How many magazines are in your home?

A lot Some Few None

10. Now I'd like to ask about media you have in your own bedroom. How many of the following do you have in your own room?

10a. Televisions?

1 2 3 4 5 6

10b. Radios?

1 2 3 4 5 6

10c. CD players?

1 2 3 4 5 6

10d. VCRs?

1 2 3 4 5 6

10e. Computers? With or without internet access?

1 2 3 4 5 6

10f. DVD players?

1 2 3 4 5 6

10g. Game players?

1 2 3 4 5 6

10.h How many books are in your room?

A lot Some Few None

10.i How many magazines are in your room?

A lot Some Few None

Media Habits

Do not include any time you spend with media for schoolwork, such as watching a video for class or going to a website your teacher recommended.

11. During the school week, about how many hours each day do you:

11a. Have the radio on?

11b. Have the television on?

11c. Have the CD player on?

11d. Have a taped program or movie on?

11e. Play a video game or computer game?

11.f Read a book for fun?

11.g Read magazines?

12. During the weekend, about how many hours each day do you:

12a. Have the radio on?

12b. Have the television on?

12c. Have the CD player on?

12d. Have a taped program or movie on?

12e. Play a video game or computer game?

12f. Read a book or magazine?

13. Are there rules in your home about how much time or when you can use certain media? (for example, do you have a restriction on how much time you are allowed to watch television?) Radio? TV? CDs? Movies? Games? Books?

Academic & Study Skills

14. What classes are you taking now?

15. How did you do in your classes last fall?

Mostly A's As & B's B's & C's C' & D's D's & F's

16. How are your classes going now?

Mostly A's As & B's B's & C's C' & D's D's & F's

17. After school, where do you go to study? If at home-which room?

18. Are there any media items like a television or radio in the place where you do homework?

19. Do you turn any of them on while you study?

20. When you're tying to get your homework done, what helps you to concentrate?

21. What distracts you from doing your homework?

22. When do you do your homework? Right after school or later in the evening?

Other questions:

23. What time of the day would you be most likely to watch TV Listen to music?

24a. Do you think watching television ever keeps you from getting your homework done?

IF YES, How often? Sometimes often a lot

24b. What about listening to music?

IF YES, How often? Sometimes often a lot

24c. Playing video games?

IF YES, How often? Sometimes often a lot

24d.Being on the computer (e-mail, web, etc)?

IF YES, How often? Sometimes often a lot

24e. Reading a book or magazine?

IF YES, How often? Sometimes often a lot

25. If your classmates spent a lot of time watching TV or listening to CDs, do you think they would do well in school (two media replaced by two main media student mentioned prior)? Why or why not?

26. What about if they spent less time watching TV or playing games?

Other

27. Do your parents ever say anything about your media habits?

IF YES, How often? Sometimes often a lot

28. How many movies do you own? Games, CDs, DVDs, Books

29. What's your favorite movie?

30. What's your favorite music group?

31.a What is your favorite subject/class in school?

31.b What you are currently going over in that class?

32a. Do you think your parent(s) know your favorite movie?

32b. Do they know your favorite music group?

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Katherine D. Ballard	Katherine D. Ballard, Doctoral Student	
Organization/Address:	Telephone:	Fax:
Educational Psychology Department Teacher's College Ball State University Muncie, IN 47306	765-214-0442	765-285-3653
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